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ABSTRACT

The counselor's dedication to human betterment makes him vulnerable to the influence of prevelant ideas about what the world needs, and therefore there are marked shifts from time to time in what counselors think they should be doing. In present times the dominant emphasis is on social reform and counselors are asking themselves whether their efforts ought to be directed toward changing social institutions and environments instead of toward helping individual clients. Although they should try to implement social reforms counselors should not repudiate the focus on individual lives that has characterized their past efforts. Evidence suggests that there is far more freedom of choice than ever before and the importance of choice as a basis for individual development has vastly increased. To expand the area of individual freedom however without helping the individual plan within this enlarged domain is disabling as indicated by the phenomenon of student discontent. Thus if increase in personal freedom is the major social development of our time, to deal with it is the most "humanitarian" thing a counselor can do. (RSM)

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HUMANITARIAN WORK OF THE COUNSELOR

(Telelecture, March 8, 1969)

If there is one thing that counselors have in common, whenever and wherever one encounters them, it is a genuine, sincere desire to help people. It is the reason they are in this business rather than something else, and it takes precedence over other kinds of motives that often activate people's efforts, such as making money, gaining power, or seeking pleasure. Counseling is truly humanitarian work.

But because this dedication to human betterment is so salient, counselors perhaps more than most people are vulnerable to the influence of whatever ideas are in the ascendant at any one time about what the world needs. Thus there can be marked shifts from time to time in what counselors think they should be doing. In the more than 30 years I have been associated with the counseling movement, I have seen these fashions come and go. Each generates a kind of orthodoxy. "This is what counseling really is. This is how you must act to be a true believer." Such fashions in counseling create special difficulties for students who enter the profession at the peak of one wave and think they know what they are getting into and find that by the time they get out something different is expected of them.

I have tried through the years to keep my own concepts about what counseling is as broad as possible, to be inclusive rather than exclusive, to avoid "nothing but" statements. Instead of replacing one's ideas, it is usually possible to stretch them so that their scope becomes wider than it was before. But while this transformation has been occurring, I find that my basic definition of counseling has become simpler all the time, closer actually to the meaning of the word in common speech. I would put it this way: Counseling is the process of helping an individual decide what to do--in other

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words, to help each person find a place and a role.

It is fairly clear that this fits in with the vocational and educational guidance emphasis that is an important, continuing part of what we might call the counseling tradition. But its implications are much broader than the world of work alone. One way of expressing what goes on in the kinds of counseling we often call psychotherapy is that the client tries to find his way through the jungle of his own feelings and motives, and that the counselor is there to help him find these paths. For the counselor whose work is directed mainly toward improving the relationships between people, what he does can be described as helping the client to discover how he should act in order to elicit desirable kinds of action in people around him. For the counselor with a developmental orientation who takes as his objective the facilitation of personal growth, self-knowledge, and self-actualization in each of his clients, what he really does is to make it possible somehow for the client to decide in what direction he wants to develop and then to take some steps in this direction.

In our particular time, the dominant emphasis seems to be on social reform, and counseling people are asking themselves whether their efforts ought not to be directed mainly toward changing social institutions and environments rather than toward thinking about the lives and circumstances of individual poor people. I am all for social reform, and for the transformation of social arrangements that perpetuate poverty, racism and war into other better-designed social arrangements. It is a crusade in which all men and women of goodwill must join, and I would expect counselors to play a prominent part in the movement. But in doing this I should hate to have us repudiate the focus on individual lives that has always characterized our past efforts.

The counselor is the person who cares about the individual caught in the system. He realizes that this particular Black high school student cannot just sit back and wait for a just society that may be brought into existence by 1980. He must do something with his own life right now. Whether he should go to college or into a job training program, how he can manage to finance whatever plan he decides on, whether or not he should take an active part in the struggle for Black Power, what to do about the draft--these are all important questions, and it is the counselor's job to help him find answers to them. This is as it has always been our major humanitarian effort.

Because I find in discussing these matters with students that there is often some confusion and misunderstanding about what I mean, let me make it clear that I am not advocating that counselors confine their activity to sitting behind an office desk engaging in one-to-one interviews. I consider where the counseling occurs and how many persons are in on it at once more or less irrelevant. I am convinced that we are not going to be able to help all the kinds of people that counseling might serve if we do not get out from behind our desks and talk to people where they are. The clearest demonstration of successful counseling of juvenile delinquents that I know of was counseling that went on in miscellaneous places and at any hour of the day or night, whenever the boys needed it. Group sessions are as productive as individual interviews for many purposes and even work better for some. What I would like to emphasize is that talking to a teenager on a street corner or meeting with a group of welfare mothers at someone's home, the focus can still be on the individual person living his unique individual life as best he can, steering his own course through the particular circumstances of his situation. This focus need be no different from what it would be in the more typical

office counseling situation. It is this orientation I am talking about, not the setting in which counseling occurs.

The fundamental fact of nature that makes this approach to counseling feasible is the multipotentiality inherent in human development. This is a concept I have been exploring--perhaps I should say even exploiting--in various ways for a number of years. What we know to be true but too often forget is that for each human individual there is a large number of developmental possibilities, only a few of which can be made into actualities. Each of us at this meeting looking back on the course of his life can think of at least half a dozen shapes his life might have taken if circumstances had been slightly different or if he had made a different decision at some crucial point.

The weight that personal decisions carry in determining directions of development varies from one individual to another. Some people see their lives as shaped mainly by forces outside their own control--limiting circumstances or the decisions others have made that control them. Others can think of periods in their lives when they deliberately chose one possible future and closed the doors leading to others. But I think we see in the present-day world many kinds of evidence that there is now far more freedom to choose for oneself than there has ever been before, and that the importance of choice as a basis for individual development has thus been vastly increased. Almost all the social changes we discuss so much these days are changes that make for increases in the number of possibilities open to each individual person. Bigger and more stable family incomes mean that a son or daughter does not have to take any job that is available in order to keep the wolf from the door. He can look around and move around. Urbanization leads to familiarity with far more styles of living than a small town ever offered. Mobility brings

possibilities of living in many sorts of place besides the place where one grew up. Communication media nowadays bombard the individual with information about products, causes, values, and sources of pleasure and satisfaction. The expanding population brings into the individual's life space a larger number of potential friends and enemies, more ways of relating oneself to others. The boundaries limiting an individual's freedom have been pushed back farther and farther. But the individual himself is still the same size. He can crowd only a limited number of experiences into any one day or any one year, and he has only a limited number of years to live.

As we puzzle over the youth movements of our time and try to understand them, I think it is this central feature of the current scene that we should attempt to come to grips with. I doubt whether the participants in these youth movements understand it very well themselves. The young person knows that he is having difficulty in establishing his own identity--a place and a role for himself--and he complains about the system that puts him in this position. The more radical young people are calling for a revolution against this inhumane system. But because revolutions of the past have been revolts against tyrannies that abolish or restrict freedom, attempts to impose the structure of such revolutions upon the current situation are curiously inappropriate and ineffective. When the son of a wealthy lawyer, for example, intelligent, good-looking, educated in the best schools, surrounded by the infinitely rich possibilities for intellectual and esthetic stimulation that are found in Berkeley, Madison, or Morningside Heights, when he demands freedom from the restrictions of the system and refers to himself as a captive or a "nigger," it is very difficult for the "over-40" generation to comprehend what he is talking about. It seems to me that one of the things this phenomenon of student discontent among those who have had the greatest advantages

indicates is that to expand the area of individual freedom without equipping the individual to chart his course within this enlarged domain is as disabling as the imposition of restrictions is. As I said before, the charting of such individual courses is the essential business of counseling. If, as I think, this increase in personal freedom is the major social development of our time, to deal with it is the most "humanitarian" thing a counselor can do.

Even in the groups we label "disadvantaged," I believe the area of freedom has expanded in our time, making acts of choice more necessary to development than they used to be. When most Black people, for example, lived on plantations or in little villages in the South, a young man usually found himself in some sort of common labor job, whether he liked it or not, by the time he reached manhood. Now that most Black people live in cities, jobs are not things that happen to them in this way. With all the handicaps an unsatisfactory environment imposes, there still are vastly more possibilities for an individual than there were in the simpler situations--possibilities for entering schools, jobs, or training programs, and for making use of social and cultural opportunities--but the person must locate such things and choose what he wants to do if he is to take advantage of them. This is a difficult thing to do. It will not just "happen." To say that a counselor's main function is to help individuals in an urban ghetto make meaningful plans for their lives does not mean that we condone ghetto conditions. Improvement of the whole situation for everybody and concern for each individual who must live his life while the improvement is going on are not opposed to one another. There is much confusion on this point, as I mentioned before. The disadvantaged individual and the disadvantaged mass are both realities. As citizens and human beings we are responsible for doing all we can to remove mass disadvantages.

As counselors we are responsible for helping disadvantaged individuals make use of whatever resources are available to them.

It is probably apparent from what I have said so far that I regard counseling as permanently indispensable in the kind of complex society we have built for mankind to live in. Too long we have looked upon counseling as mainly curative or remedial, assuming that if social problems could be solved and physical and mental health assured for everyone, there would be no need for a counselor's services. I do not see things this way. Unless we let ourselves be maneuvered into a regimented social order in which every person will be told what he is to do, each individual will continue to face the responsibility of choosing which of his possible selves is to be actualized. The fundamental questions will remain: Who am I? Where is my place? What shall I do with my life? I hope that counselors will find more and more ways to help human beings answer these questions and combine this effort with whatever other humanitarian work they take it upon themselves to do.

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